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A 'Shark Tank' judge hated this Pittsburgh-area woman's idea. She refused to follow commands.

Kevin O'Leary told Kelly Costello, who makes cakes for dogs: 'I forbid you to go on.' More than a decade later, that could be why she's succeeding

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It was 2012, and Kelly Costello's dream of landing a business deal with a Hollywood celebrity was crumbling for all to see.

Ms. Costello had flown from her one-bedroom apartment in Bellevue to Los Angeles to pitch her product — Puppy Cake, sweets for dogs made with canine-safe ingredients such as the chocolate substitute carob — on "Shark Tank," a TV show where a panel of famous judges considered investing in up-and-coming businesses — or rejecting them.

One by one, each of the "sharks" weighed in, some offering advice, others delivering brutal feedback that felt made-for-TV.

Canadian entrepreneur Kevin "Mr. Wonderful" O'Leary hounded Ms. Costello — there wasn't a market for her product, he said, questionably adding that if a dog ate a cake produced for humans and died, the dog could simply be replaced.

"Thank goodness we've met. I forbid you to go on. It's insanity," he added.

Mt. Lebanon native Mark Cuban said he liked the idea but

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By Alpha Health Secrets questioned whether Ms. Costello could overcome her lack of sales experience. Lori Greiner, a presenter on the shopping channel QVC, said she believed that Puppy Cake's small line of products was too niche. She advised Ms. Costello to produce a wider range of dog-friendly foods.

"I got a swift kick in the pants," Ms. Costello recently told the Post-Gazette.

But, she added: "Hearing that tough advice was actually really great.

"I'm really thankful for it."

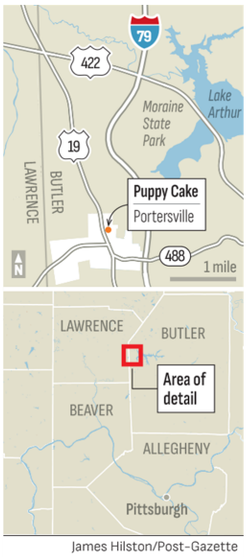
Tiny borough, big draw

The failed pitch was a rough experience for Ms. Costello, who was one of the few business owners to be selected for filming but left empty-handed. But she returned to Bellevue with newfound resolve.

Ms. Costello decided to ignore "Mr. Wonderful" and push on.

Wonderful decision: Puppy Cake now sells more than 100,000 products per year, according to the company's internal data.

Ms. Costello started her company in her apartment, but she needed more space after her TV appearance. She relocated to a factory in Evans City in 2013, and again to a 20,000-square-foot facility in Portersville, Butler County, in 2020, and now lives in New Castle.



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Today, Puppy Cake offers microwavable or bakeable cakes, "Puppy Scoops" and "Hoggin' Dogs" ice cream mixes in over a dozen different total flavors, including birthday cake, pumpkin spice, and bacon. Products range in price from $5.29 for a 2.32-ounce ice cream mix (which requires water) to $15.99 for a full-size cake kit (which requires an egg, vegetable oil, and water).

Puppy Cake's bright pink sign outside its factory draws the attention of people on Perry Highway driving through Portersville, a tiny borough of a little more than 200.

Accordingly, Ms. Costello recently built a small storefront by the factory's front door so she wouldn't have to keep turning potential customers away.

Broadening a 'niche' business

Commuter-turned-customer April Neill and her two daughters, all from Cranberry, recently pulled up when they saw the factory — after all, it was one of their dogs' birthdays.

They rang a bell to call for Ms. Costello.

She emerged from the factory accompanied by Jefe, her 8-year-old terrier mix, and Gary, her 11-year-old Boston terrier mix, to explain her product selection.

The pitch worked.

Ms. Neill said the cake mix and three varieties of ice cream she purchased — including "prime rib" — were reasonably priced and "way better" options than simple whipped cream.

The Portersville factory and its humming production line, where workers seal cake mix and dog bone-shaped baking trays into colorful packaging, is a far cry from Ms. Costello's shoestring

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Copyright © 1997-2025 PG Publishing Co. All rights reserved budget when she founded the business as a 21-year-old in 2007.

At the time, she had to pack the cakes herself. She scraped together $1,000 just to buy her website domain, puppycake.com.

Today, Puppy Cake generates much of its business by selling directly to mom-and-pop shops and independent pet stores, much like how Ms. Costello operated early on, when Amazon was still in its infancy.

A dog cake kit from Puppy Cake in Prospect Wednesday, July 2, 2025.
(Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette)

She caters to smaller outlets by allowing them to mix and match orders, down to one container of any given flavor. Larger distributors buy her products by the case, which hold up to 48 cake mixes or 36 ice cream containers. The company's most popular item, peanut butter cake mix, sells an average of 80 units a day, Ms. Costello said.

Puppy Cake started to take off when Ms. Costello joined Fulfillment by Amazon, she said, a partnership service for small businesses that allows companies to utilize its fulfillment centers across the country and offer faster shipping with Amazon Prime.

Ms. Costello said she quickly went from selling a few hundred dollars a month of products to several thousand.

The next frontier: cats?

When she first started, Ms. Costello mostly targeted millennial-aged women like herself — since she was familiar with her own wants and needs.

"I was my ideal customer," she said.

She had to shift her strategy as her core demographic transitioned from millennials to Generation Z, and she has found that the marketing power of social media has correspondingly dwindled. Younger customers are more careful with how they spend their money, and they are more likely to factor peer reviews over flashy marketing campaigns, she said.

"They grew up with the internet," Ms. Costello said. "It really has to be their peers telling them that they want to buy it."

Nowadays, Puppy Cake focuses on search engine optimization — making sure that their products appear near the top of search results for certain terms. Customers searching on Amazon for "birthday cakes for dogs," for example, will come across dozens of Puppy Cake products, nearly all of them with thousands of ratings above four stars out of a possible five.

After all, every edge counts for a small business.

Back at the Portersville factory, Ms. Costello pushed through a set of plastic industrial curtains to enter the mixing room — which might as well be paradise for a craving dog.

Two giant mixers taller than a human dominated one corner of the room.

Nearby, vats of homemade sprinkles stood ready for distribution.

Puppy Cake formerly sourced its sprinkles from a bakery in Washington County. But they couldn't keep up with orders. So Ms. Costello's husband, Blake, who has a background in chemistry, recreated and modified the bakery's sprinkles so the colors would last longer.

Ms. Costello's product line is about to expand beyond dogs. She's focused on developing "Kitty Cakes" — to reach, well, you know.

But cats are pickier than dogs — all the way down to a product's texture. So far, a chicken-flavored mix is performing well. Ms. Costello's goal is to get a positive reaction from 75% of the cat testers. Each of her products have to receive animal approval before they hit the shelves.

"We'll never get 100%," she said with a smile.

(Note: Ms. Costello said that she cannot recommend Puppy Cakes for human consumption because they haven't passed the necessary inspections.)

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DK **David Kondis**
12 July, 2025
Great article about some organic home grown business success. Congratulations to Ms Costello and continued success young lady !!
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12 July, 2025

This is so awesome! A small business, local, and woman owned - the trifecta!!

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A

A.B.

12 July, 2025

The Shark Tank crew gets it wrong sometimes. They were very short-sighted not understanding how pets have become family members. In some cases, they replace children for couples who opt out of having kids or who can't have them (crazy, but true). Congrats to Ms. Costello and continued success in he...

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Liz Dolinar

12 July, 2025

I believe they all passed on Ring doorbells as well.

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12 July, 2025

Good for her! Who would ever want to be in business with Mr Terrible anyway.

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Carole McIntyre

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Where does someone on a TV entertainment show get off trying to "prohibit" anyone from doing anything?

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RL

Ray L

12 July, 2025

The money people will spend on their pets is hard to understand. Just toys alone is mind boggling especially when I have had more fun with dogs playing tug of war with an old towel. There are many people who own dogs and prevent them from being dogs and letting them run loose in an empty field as t...

See more *(Edited)*

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DK

David Kondis

12 July, 2025

Ray - what you say is accurate, but it's not really about the dog (or cat). These are products sold to humans for their fulfillment. It's an interesting niche. I say this as my doodle compels me to pet him while the golden is busy chewing on a rope toy - that I got inexpensively at Aldi …. ;-)

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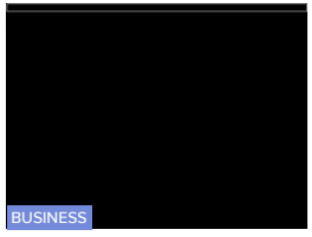
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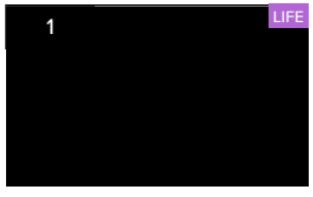
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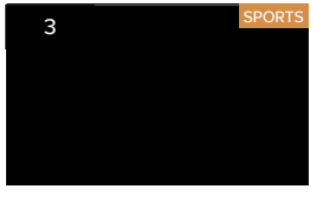
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